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The Cultural Landscape at Ke`anae and Wailuanui

Taro plant. Photo by the author.

Ke`anae, the subject of an extensive cultural resource study sponsored by the Maui County Planning Department, is a noted landmark on the island of Maui. The rugged peninsula juts into the sea, jagged black rocks smashing the waves to white spray, while the rest of the coast is high verdant cliffs where the highway perches, curving in and out of steep gulches. But the interior of Ke`anae peninsula resembles a quilt in shades of green, created by small irrigated taro patches, along with clumps of bananas, *noni*, and *ti*. In fact, it is a man-made garden, since much of the soil was brought onto the rugged a`a* lava by hand. Water is diverted from Palauhulu stream shortly before it reaches the ocean and is brought down to Ke`anae by means of a flume where it nourishes each of the taro ponds in turn, before it is released to the sea. A similar quilt or mosaic of taro fields is found in the neighboring valley of Wailuanui. These two areas contain some of the oldest land-use patterns in Hawai`i, which have persisted to the present day, surviving technological advances and changes in cultural and governmental systems.

The taro plant (*Colocasia esculenta*) is a social, nutritional, and spiritual foundation of the Hawaiian culture. Nowhere else in the world was a taro cultivation more developed than in Hawai`i. It was the staple for hundreds of thou-

Taro fields—Ke`anae. Photo by the author.



sands of Hawaiians before European contact. Planning, development, and maintenance of well-

engineered irrigation for taro pond fields required a stable political system and community cooperation. All parts of the taro plant are used for food. Not only is *poi* made from the corms, but the stem is used in soups and stews, and the leaves are used for *lauau* and *lu`au* dishes mixed with fish, squid, or meat. Taro is also connected to the origin stories of the Hawaiians. The child Haloa, stillborn and buried, became a taro plant. His younger brother, also named Haloa, became the ancestor of the people. In the Hawaiian language, parts of the taro plant and its growth patterns bear the same names as the human body and the Hawaiian family. The plant has a *piko* (navel) and the stem is called the *ha*, which is also a word for breath, the basis of life. The main plant center is the *makua* (parent); the smaller plants budding out of the *makua* are the *ōha* (children or offspring).

Taro is the source of many Hawaiian proverbs such as: *I maika`i ke kalo ka `ohā*—“the goodness of the taro is judged by the young plant it produces,”—a metaphor for the parents being judged from the behavior of their children. The title of the study of the cultural landscape of Ke`anae and Wailuanui (produced for the county of Maui in 1995 by Group 70 International, Inc., Davianna McGregor, Ph.D., and Cultural Surveys Hawai`i, Inc.) is drawn from another Hawaiian saying: *Kalo kanu o ka `āina*, “taro planted on the land” interpreted to mean “Natives from the land from generations back.” (Pukui 1983)

The Maui County General Plan calls for preservation of the unique qualities of Maui’s com-



Irrigated taro fields. Photo by the author.

munities, but it does not define those unique qualities. The 1994 Hāna Community Plan more specifically calls for “preservation and enhancement of the current land-use patterns which establish and enrich the region’s unique and diverse qualities.” The taro landscape at Ke`anae and Wailuanui manifests a viable traditional economy which has maintained historic and cultural integrity, traditional lifestyle, and social continuity to an equal or greater extent than any of the other taro growing landscapes in Hawai`i. Physical isolation, economic constraints, the characteristics of the environment itself, and the traditional attitude of the community have all contributed to this integrity. Therefore, the Maui Planning Department decided to use a cultural landscape approach to define the patterns and practices that add up to a unique community. Ke`anae and Wailuanui were chosen for the study with the purpose of guiding land-use decisions which will affect traditional farming and cultural practices, as



well as the physical appearance, of many of Maui’s rural communities.

Using federal monies through the Certified Local Government Program, the recommendations of the Hawai`i State Task Force on Cultural Landscapes (1994), and National Register Bulletin 30 *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes*, county planning staff recruited a research team. The skills of archeologists, ethnographers, architects, and planners were used to conduct the study. (The CLG funding was supplemented by *pro bono* services from members of the consultant team who made a professional commitment to the quality of the project.) The researchers worked closely with members of the community; interviews, visits, and field trips were an integral part of the study.

The Ke`anae region has a long history of relative isolation from the rest of Maui. The local topography is rugged: deep valleys and high cliffs cut into the sides of the great shield volcano, Haleakalā; sea cliffs and boulder beaches stretch along the coast. Abundant rainfall creates perennial streams and encourages vigorous forest growth. Until the Hāna Belt Road was completed in 1926, the area was largely inaccessible except by foot, horseback, or boat. This physical isolation has insulated the community of Ke`anae and Wailuanui, allowing it to retain many characteristics of local indigenous culture which have been lost in more readily accessible areas of Hawai`i.

The cultural landscape of today developed in an historical context of changing land tenure systems, influences of Chinese and other immigrants to Maui, and advancing technology. Records of the Hawai`i Land Commission document land-use during the 1850s. Testimonies given by applicants for land awards reveal locations, boundaries, land usage, place names, and a family’s investment of time and custom in an area. Some 490 taro patches of various sizes were claimed at Ke`anae and Wailuanui. Other crops listed on the claims include dryland taro and sweet potatoes, *olana* (renowned as the best material for cordage), and *hala* (Pandanus—used for weaving). Several claims include pools and fishponds.

The Ke`anae peninsula is a recent lava flow. The story goes that a chief of the Ke`anae region was involved in rivalry with neighboring Wailua. Determined to increase taro productivity, he set all his people to work carrying soil in baskets from the valley down to the lava point, which had been used only for fishing. The soil and the banks enclosing the patches were transported and packed into place in the course of many years. The legend implies that intensive planning and labor required to redesign a barren *a`a* peninsula into an irrigated, productive landscape. This is a well-engineered cultural adaptation of a specific environment. Taro farming today is a hand-reared crop, better defined as horticulture, in contrast to modern mechanized large field agriculture.

Vegetation in the region today is primarily of Polynesian or foreign introduction. Taro, coconut, and *ti* were all brought by the Polynesians as essential cultigens for settling new islands. Forests of eucalyptus and ironwood were planted by Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933. Ginger, African tulip trees, and other garden plants have become established in the forests along the highway and in the study area. Most endemic vegetation has retreated to the uplands.

Changing technology, economics, and lifestyles have affected systems of circulation and settlement. Convex earthen banks around the taro

pondfields serve as dividers between the fields and still provide trails for foot traffic within the community. Fences are scarce and people walk through each others' land and fields. Road circulation is limited to the periphery of Ke'anae and Wailuanui Homestead Road. Ninety percent of all residences and public buildings in the region are located along these roadways. Increased dependence on jobs "outside" is causing a change in settlement pattern with residences and stores locating up along the main road. The Ke'anae Landing (Hawai'i Inventory of Historic Places 1992) was the area's link to the sea and commercial transportation until the 1920s. The Pi'ilani Highway, an improved trail created by the pre-contact Hawaiians for overland travel, is still found in many areas along the coast, though erosion and aggressive vegetation have affected it.



Taro patches, Ke'anae peninsula c. 1934. Courtesy Bishop Museum.

Archeological sites are present and some have retained their structural integrity. The taro fields at Ke'anae were listed on the Hawai'i State Register of Historic Places as a result of this study. A comparison of the 1994 map of the fields with a map made in 1903 of Land Commission Awards shows that the layout of the fields and the configuration of water flow through them has not changed. Given the complex layout and the constraints of the topography, it is likely that the configuration of the Ke'anae taro field system has remained the same since its initial layout long before European contact. A thorough study of archeological sites in the area has a high potential to yield information on the origins, chronology, and development of Hawaiian taro cultivation and the development of the associated Hawaiian community (Hammatt, 1995).

The architecture of the community is consistent with a plantation vernacular residential style: hipped roofs made of corrugated metal, wide overhangs, porches, double-hung windows with broad

trim, single wall construction, and uncomplicated interior plans, with a modest size of 500 to 1000 square feet. Two churches dating to the 1860s and the 1912 Ke'anae School have each been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Several bridges in the region have also been determined eligible for listing on the register, some for their design and construction, but generally for their role in overcoming the challenge of providing reliable surface transportation through the rugged Ko'olau district to connect central Maui with Hāna.

The landscape was also studied in terms of traditional cultural practices, such as fishing and gathering. This became an entire section of the study which documents the Hawaiian perspective on the use of land, reaching beyond subsistence practices to traditions and values. It is clear that the Ke'anae-Wailuanui cultural landscape, from the perspective of the people whose families have lived in the region for generations, is also a traditional cultural property (National Register Bulletin 38).

The Ko'olau Ditch, which taps the East Maui watershed for plantation crops and domestic water on the other side of Haleakalā, is also important in the traditional cultural practices region. It provides access to the mountain for hunting and collecting (while diminishing the surface flow) and the stream wildlife which have been used by the Hawaiian people since their settlement of the island of Maui.

The inventory of components includes types of structures, clusters, boundaries, open areas, and viewing points. Landscape use patterns are considered in terms of spatial organization and the natural determinants of settlement and construction. Taro cultivation has affected land tenure in this region, giving it a scale and variety that completely differs from the huge plantations and ranches which dominate most privately held land in Hawai'i.

The Ke'anae-Wailuanui cultural landscape was found to be significant under all four criteria of the National Register and an additional criteria used in the state of Hawai'i because it also represents an important resource in the perpetuation of traditional Hawaiian cultural practices. The area manifests integrity in terms of spatial organization, physical setting, and historic associations. Other cultural influences have been assimilated, and the region is a modern community in many ways. However, there remains an unbroken relationship to the foundations of Hawaiian culture through the traditional cultivation of taro, the major component of the landscape.

Planning issues are approached in terms of threats to the integrity of the region. The recom-

